

INVESTIGATIONS

# Explosive report alleged sex abuse by SBC leader Johnny Hunt. His accuser still waits for justice.

By **Robert Downen**, *Staff writer*

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In this photo released by the Baptist Press, Johnny Hunt, a native American from Woodstock, Ga., was elected new president of the Southern Baptist Convention on Tuesday, June 10, 2008 in Indianapolis.

Matt Miller, HO / AP

It took her a decade to find sufficient words to describe those few moments with the Southern Baptist Convention leader.

Johnny Hunt was 24 years the woman's elder, a mentor and the recent president of the nation's second-largest faith group. He'd been an advocate for her husband's ministry. She saw him as a father figure.

In July 2010, while vacationing in Panama City Beach, Fla., Hunt invited himself into her short-term rental condo and sexually assaulted her while her husband was not there, the woman said in an interview with the Houston Chronicle. She remained quiet in the months after, still confused and intimidated by warnings that coming forward would harm Southern Baptist churches, she said.

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The couple said Hunt then brought in the longtime counselor of his Atlanta-area megachurch, who believed Hunt's claim that the woman consented to his advances — without first talking to her. The counselor focused on the woman's mental health and what he said were marital issues, which they said made them internalize that they were to blame for Hunt's behavior.

It took more than a decade — and extensive expert therapy — for the couple to begin to articulate what occurred because of Hunt's stature in their Southern Baptist faith and the trust they once placed in him. "I didn't have any proper language or labels," the woman said. "I was living with false blame and guilt."

Her allegations further focus the spotlight on the SBC's sex-abuse crisis ahead of a potentially historic meeting that begins Tuesday. Sixty-plus pages of documents she and her husband provided shed light on Hunt's desire to suppress the incident, which became national news last month when an independent investigation into the handling

of sexual abuse reports by the SBC's top leadership body, the executive committee, became public.

Hunt, 69, has admitted to a sexual indiscretion with the woman but says it was consensual. He did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this story, even after being presented with a list of questions about the couple's claims that he intentionally tried to silence or intimidate them. His encounter with the woman is the only publicly known allegation of sexual abuse against him.

Demanded last year by some 15,000 SBC church representatives, the nearly 400-page report from Guidepost Solutions that includes the allegations against Hunt details how top leaders of the nation's second-largest faith group perpetuated a culture of silence on abuse by ignoring or shaming survivors and, fearing lawsuits, rejecting policies that experts say would help protect children.

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**Abuse of Faith:** View our database of hundreds of Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers charged with sex crimes

Guidepost's findings echo those of "Abuse of Faith," a 2019 Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News investigation that found at least 400 SBC church leaders and volunteers had been credibly accused of sex crimes since 2000. Those church leaders left behind more than 700 victims, nearly all of them kids.

The woman and her husband — an SBC pastor for decades — are among a small number of adults who have come forward about being abused by pastors, often times first sexually, then spiritually. Their window for pressing criminal charges in Florida elapsed a few years ago.

The couple spoke to the Chronicle on condition of anonymity in hopes that their story could educate others about the manipulation and abuse tactics that they say were so effective on them. They said they wanted to guard against potential retaliation while still drawing attention to the parts of their story that Guidepost could not publish because the firm was limited to the actions of the executive committee, which Hunt left around the time of the alleged assault. The alleged abuse in Florida happened one month after his SBC presidency ended because of term limits in 2010.

Hunt resigned from leadership of the SBC's massive domestic evangelism arm ahead of the Guidepost report last month, and numerous Southern Baptist organizations — including his longtime megachurch near Atlanta — have temporarily or permanently cut ties with the two-time SBC president.

## Churches convene

The couple's decision to share their story comes as thousands of church delegates are set to convene in Anaheim, Calif., on Tuesday and vote on numerous policy recommendations from an SBC task force on abuse. It's likely to be a historic few days for the SBC, which has for years seen its top leaders either resign in scandal or in protest over abuse reforms, racial reconciliation and other serious issues.

Some proposals — including a database of credibly accused ministers and emphasizing the use of licensed, trauma-informed counselors — are already getting pushback. A number of pastors have recently mobilized in opposition to the report by Guidepost, saying the firm is untrustworthy because it supported Pride Month on social media. Others dismissed the idea that churches should use professional, trauma-informed counseling, saying Scripture is sufficient for such wounds.

Decades of research show trauma often causes a physical, neurological injury. It can insidiously remap brains and leave its worst victims in a sort of Stockholm syndrome, simultaneously wounded, in denial and particularly vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation — especially from perceived authority figures. So severe is the power imbalance that at least 13 states, including Texas, have made it illegal for counselors and ministers to have sex with those in their care.

The woman and her husband say they know such trauma too well, and they pray the SBC will adopt stronger counseling protocols when churches meet on Tuesday. Like so many abuse survivors, they say the trauma of physical violation has paled in comparison to being ignored, silenced or vilified by those they once thought were shepherds.

Guidepost investigators interviewed the couple, Hunt and four others — including the counselor who was Hunt's friend and employee. Guidepost said those interviews corroborated her allegations, and the Chronicle has confirmed the new documents provided by the couple were handed over to Guidepost investigators.

Guidepost said Hunt's story was inconsistent and did not seem credible. In one of his interviews with Guidepost, he denied any physical contact with the woman. In another, he claimed he didn't even know the couple.

## **'Forced himself on her'**

The couple became close with Hunt around 2003. He was by then a well-known evangelical figure, revered for his passion for global missions and mentoring young pastors. In 2005, she and her husband moved near Atlanta after the husband was called to pastor a Southern Baptist congregation not far from First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ga., the megachurch that Hunt led from 1986 until 2019. The husband and Hunt grew closer over the next few years.

At the SBC's 2008 meeting, Hunt was elected president. He won again in 2009. At the SBC's annual meeting in June 2010, he invited them to Panama City Beach. After a brief trip, the woman wanted to return to hear former Florida State University football coach Bobby Bowden speak.

When the husband later inquired about vacation rentals, Hunt recommended the condo next to his, the husband said. On July 25, 2010, the woman said she was alone in the condo and went onto her balcony. Hunt was on the balcony adjacent, she told Guidepost. He said he was hot, and she said he could come over to get out of the sun. Hunt then suggested they move inside because he was afraid to be seen, Guidepost wrote. Hunt made a number of suggestive comments about her body, and prodded her with inappropriate

questions — was she “wild growing up?” she recalled him asking, according to Guidepost.

Eventually, the woman says, Hunt pinned her down, groped her and “violently” kissed her while trying to remove her clothes. Shocked and scared, the woman told Hunt she didn’t want him to ruin his ministry, after which Hunt “forced himself on her again,” according to the Guidepost report. She “did not reciprocate, but rather stood eyes open and very stiff, hoping he would just stop and leave,” Guidepost found. “He finally stopped and left.”

Later, Hunt texted her to come onto the balcony, then said he “would like to have sex with her three times a day” and made other suggestive comments, Guidepost said. Soon after leaving Florida, the couple were called to a meeting with the counselor and Hunt. Hunt admitted that he had kissed the woman, touched her breasts over clothing and tried to pull her shorts down, Guidepost said. But Hunt said it was consensual — “thank God I didn’t consummate the relationship,” Hunt told her husband, according to Guidepost. The wife said she was too confused and scared to speak up, or was talked over when she tried to.

Hunt then referred them to counseling with Roy Blankenship, who’d worked for First Baptist Woodstock for years. Blankenship declined to comment to the Chronicle, but Guidepost said he and four others corroborated much of the couple’s story.

Days after the alleged abuse occurred, Hunt announced a sabbatical. He said he was exhausted from his presidency. Now, 12 years later, in the wake of the Guidepost report, Hunt says the sabbatical was

prompted by a “brief, but improper, encounter” with the woman. But he denies it was an assault.

By August 2010, the couple’s lives had begun to spiral. They said Blankenship — who Guidepost found was not a licensed Georgia counselor at the time — focused their counseling sessions on the wife’s mental health or on marital problems that they said didn’t exist, save for those related to the incident with Hunt.

They say they were instructed to not discuss the matter, even with each other. The woman’s mental health declined to the point of having suicidal ideation, she said. The husband said he felt like he had to choose between his marriage and ministry.

There were only three possible outcomes, he wrote: “Physical suicide. Emotional suicide — by staying together in ministry. Ministerial suicide.”

“God I do need a miracle,” he wrote in one journal entry. “I feel numb. I feel paralyzed. I feel trapped,” he wrote in another.

And so he resigned from his church. Hunt was back in the pulpit soon after.

## ‘Repent and restore’

The husband called Hunt in April 2011 to “reconcile” what happened, he said. Hunt interjected by asking, “Did she say we had sex?” He then allegedly accused the husband of threatening him, and then said

he was sorry that the husband was having “trouble forgiving.” Hunt then offered prayers and then hung up, the husband said.

For the next few years, the couple says they struggled to make sense of what happened. By 2018, the husband had a new church job; he became enraged, he said, when he heard that Hunt was leaving First Baptist to take a top position at the SBC’s North American Mission Board.

“How can God allow this to happen? I just don’t understand how God could allow this person to be promoted again,” he recently told the Chronicle.

He eventually left that church and enrolled in a non-SBC seminary, where he was introduced to scholarly work on abusive systems and deception techniques.

Suddenly, it all clicked. Through counseling with experts, including with the firm of renowned religious trauma scholar Diane Langberg, the couple said they came to understand what they could not quite articulate for a decade.

They decided to talk to Guidepost, hoping that their story would help illustrate how power dynamics — combined with a lack of trauma-informed counseling — can be weaponized against the vulnerable. In the weeks after the Guidepost report, two SBC seminaries and the North American Mission Board have said they are reviewing their abuse policies and institutional ties to Hunt.

First Baptist Woodstock has also suspended Hunt's status as pastor emeritus and is developing a process that the church's new pastor said he hopes will expose the truth and provide a path to justice and restoration for those involved.

But the couple wants more from Hunt. "I hear a lot of words like restore and restoration," the husband said. "I don't hear any words like reconciliation."

His wife interjected: "Which means you admit what you did wrong. You confess it all. You repent and restore what you took."

The couple isn't holding out hope for such action. But they want to draw attention to the pattern of emotional and spiritual manipulation that they say kept them quiet, confused and in perpetual trauma for more than a decade.

[robert.downen@chron.com](mailto:robert.downen@chron.com)

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By [Robert Downen](#)



Robert Downen covered nonprofits and other business news for the Houston Chronicle. He also covered religion, City Hall and COVID-19.

After joining the newspaper as a Hearst Fellow in 2017, Downen was part of the investigative team behind "Abuse of Faith," a joint investigation by the Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News that detailed hundreds of sexual abuses by Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers. The series won or placed in numerous awards contests, prompted new disclosure laws and continues to dominate the agenda of the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's second-largest faith group.

Prior to that, he worked as a business reporter in Albany, New York, and as the managing editor of a group of six newspapers in Illinois. He is a 2014 graduate of Eastern Illinois University.

You can follow him on Twitter at @RobDownenChron.

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